

Rotating Extension Column

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By: Daniel E. Mullins

IFAS Extension Commercial Horticulture Agent

Opportunities for Small Farmers are on the Rise

Many high volume producers of conventional agricultural crops continue to struggle as they compete on the world market while experiencing rising costs for land, supplies, labor, energy and equipment. At the same time, small farmers are being presented with some excellent opportunities.

The term "small farming" is used loosely when describing non - conventional agriculture in a particular part of the country. It includes many operations, some of which have become buzz words such as alternative crops, specialty crops, sustainable agriculture, niche' crops, value-added products, agri-tourism, organic production, locally grown and community supported agriculture.

Some conventional crop producers have already transitioned to alternative agricultural operations, and there is also a trend toward gaining new blood in agriculture as young people are becoming interested in startup small farm operations. A recent Associated Press article entitled "New Generation of Farmers Cropping Up", addressed this trend. In the article there was an example of how two journalism majors with no farm background became vegetable producers.

There are many other success stories among those who are growing and marketing alternative crops. According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, in 2002 specialty crops accounted for 44 billion dollars in sales. Vegetable sales accounted for 17 billion, while nursery/floriculture crops brought in 14 billion dollars and fruits and nuts sold for 13 billion dollars.

Much of the demand for these crops is being consumer driven. Consumers now want to know where their food and other farm produce is grown and who grew it. They want to support their local farmers and are concerned with the safety and freshness of their food. Knowing these facts provides unlimited opportunities for local farmers.

As bright as the future for the small farmers appears, there are some challenges. One would think that with consumers preferring fresh, locally grown produce and with farmers wishing to make a profit there should be few problems. Actually, connecting the consumer with the farmer is not always as simple as it might seem.

The small farmer faces a constant challenge in providing a predictable supply of consistently high quality produce at a sufficient volume. Weather, pest levels and other factors have positive or negative impacts with each crop.

It also turns out that marketing is as important, if not more important, than actually growing the product. “If you can’t sell it for a profit, there is no need in growing it”. This is a common phrase that we hear in the agricultural community, and it often limits the selection of agricultural products that are available at a given time of year.

It is often assumed that with communication being what it is today that we would know who is offering what farm produce during any time of year. This is not true in many cases. We have a long way to go in learning and applying better marketing techniques.

With that said, the future looks bright for some who would like to make a living or produce supplemental income on a few acres. Regardless of the crop, it is intensive production requiring more investment per acre in time and money, but the rewards can be great.

I look forward to seeing this “other agriculture” emerge as a more important part of our economy and help to increase the number of family farms. Maybe one day local consumers will have more choices including organic produce, locally grown fruits and vegetables, agri-tourism opportunities, locally grown cut flowers and local value added products.

There is much information available to anyone who is interested in becoming, or transitioning to a small farm operation. The University of Florida's Small Farms web site is a good place to start. Go to <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service is also an excellent source. Known as ATTRA, the site can be accessed

by going to <http://www.attra.org>. And, of course your local Extension office can provide these and other sources of information.

For more information or if you have a question, call Dan Mullins, Extension Commercial Horticulture Agent, The University of Florida/IFAS-Santa Rosa County Extension, at 850-623-3868, between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 pm weekdays. Hearing-impaired individuals may call Santa Rosa County Emergency Management Service at 983-5373 (TDD).

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